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Views on a new Near East

The Role of the Mosque in the Syrian Revolution

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By Thomas Pierret

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Syrian mosques constituted the backbone of the Syrian insurgency of the early 1980s, as armed Islamist groups recruited much of their membership in mosque-based study circles that had flourished among the urban middle-class during the previous decade. Islamic networks and, therefore, mosques, have been far less central to the current uprising, which relies on a broader, humbler and less urban popular base. Nevertheless, places of worship and men of religion have played a role that is not insignificant.

The mosque as a symbol and as a place of gathering has been crucial to ongoing events. Many of the early demonstrations witnessed in March 2011 took place in and around mosques after Friday prayer, which under Baathist rule has been one of the very few opportunities for mass gatherings. In Deraa, the first seat of the uprising, protesters entrenched themselves in the grand mosque al-Umari for a week until it was stormed by security forces. The Umayyad mosque in Damascus was also among the first venues for demonstration in the capital, as thousands shouted "God is

greatest!" and "Freedom!" after Friday prayer on March 18 and 25. However, the mosque, located in the heart of the Old City, was rapidly 'neutralised' through various repressive measures including the creation of "mosque committees" – groups of thugs recruited by the regime to pack prayer rooms and to break up demonstrations on Fridays.

Despite repression, other Damascene mosques like al-Rifa'i (Kafr Souseh) and al-Hasan (Midan) remained major hotbeds of unrest for several months. Hasan became such a prominent symbol of and for the opposition that its forecourt was chosen as the starting point of an anti-regime demonstration organised by – mostly secular – artists and intellectuals in July 2011. Even in Aleppo, which had remained calmer than Damascus until early 2012, the Amina mosque in the middle-class neighbourhood of Sayf al-Dawla was one of the few places that witnessed several demonstrations.¹

Mosques were also at the centre of several episodes of state repression that profoundly shocked religious-minded Syrians and, in the eyes of many, made the security forces appear as an Alawite sectarian militia battling against the creed of the Sunni majority. Not only did the army, police and shabiha (pro-regime thugs) repeatedly penetrate mosques to beat demonstrators, thus violating the sacredness of the place, they sometimes committed gratuitous acts of sacrilege. For instance, one video posted on YouTube purportedly shows a group of Syrian soldiers sitting in a mosque before mocking the Islamic prayer under the aegis of a smoking "imam".² During the summer of 2011, soldiers deliberately targeted mosques in Homs and Deir ez-Zour, in the east, with 23mm anti-aircraft guns. These attacks provoked such an outrage that Bashar al-Assad himself felt compelled to deny the accusations during a Ramadan banquet organised in honour of the Muslim scholars – a blatant lie as demonstrated by several video clips.³

Syria's religious Sunni leaders have been deeply divided by the current events. In the Umayyad mosque in Damascus, early demonstrations happened in spite of the pro-regime sermons delivered by the preacher Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti, a scholar of world standing and an old ally of the Baathist regime. In the al-Rifa'i and al-Hasan mosques, worshippers came from all over the capital to listen to outspoken clerics, respectively Usama al-Rifa'i and Krayyim Rajih. Whereas the most vocally pro-regime sheikhs like al-Buti and the Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassun had been close to the Assad family for decades, al-Rifa'i and Rajih had only recently established acceptable relations with the regime after years of conflict: the former had spent 15 years of his life in exile, and the latter was the spiritual heir of Hasan Habannaka, the leader of the religious opposition to the Baath in the 1960s.⁴ Consequently, they had much less to lose by standing against the regime than their more compromised colleagues. The content of their sermons was not overtly revolutionary, but nevertheless stood in total contradiction with the official discourse: whereas the latter depicted the protest as the result of a foreign conspiracy, the rebellious scholars proclaimed the legitimacy of democratic demands and held the regime responsible for the violence.

Although cases like al-Rifa'i and Rajih were rather exceptional in Damascus, the fact that both of them were highly respected figures made them a serious threat to the regime. In August the two rebellious clerics were joined by several of their senior

colleagues from Damascus in signing a statement condemning the military crackdown on the defiant cities of Hama and Deir ez-Zour. The move was all the more worrying for Assad that a similar statement was released at the same moment by the Muslim scholars of Aleppo, who until then had remained almost totally silent.

Combined with an upsurge in the number and frequency of demonstrations in and around the capital, the clerics' lack of discipline convinced the regime to break with the hesitant approach it had adopted until then: outspoken preachers were dismissed from their Friday pulpit, and al-Rifa'i was even assaulted by regime thugs during the Night of Power.⁵

This showdown revealed both the determination of the regime and the clergy's weaknesses. Indeed, the former's fears of popular outrage, which until then had prevented it from cracking down on senior Muslim scholars, did not materialise: although the assault on al-Rifa'i provoked large demonstrations in the suburbs of Damascus, very little happened in the sheikh's actual stronghold, that is, the middle and upper-class neighbourhoods of the city centre. Moreover, when his mosque reopened a few weeks later with al-Rifa'i's son Bilal as preacher, the attendees at the Friday sermon had dramatically decreased.

This fall in mass support was deeply resented by close disciples of the sheikh, who blamed the "cowardliness" of the Damascene bourgeoisie.⁶ Another way to look at this episode would be to say that it illustrates the class dimension of the Syrian uprising. Whereas the insurgency of the early 1980s was a predominantly urban middle-class movement, the 2011 revolution found the overwhelming majority of its active partisans in poorer towns and neighbourhoods. This does not mean that the upper classes look favourably at the regime, but that after a decade of economic liberalisation, they have been reluctant to jeopardise their comfortable lifestyle in favour of a perilous revolutionary process.

There is sometimes more than the fear of chaos behind the quiescence of the privileged classes, however. Over the last decades, it has been very hard to do serious business in Syria without buying off one or more influential intelligence officers. Corruption has thus created close relations between the economic elites and the security apparatus. Since the Muslim scholars have always been closely tied to the merchants, the former were inevitably dragged into this unholy alliance. This trend was reinforced by the fact that crony businessmen, who contrary to the old merchant families had not traditionally funded religious activities, started to do so during the last decade in order to buttress their electoral ambitions. It is striking, for instance, that when Sheikh al-Rifa'i's mosque was surrounded by regime thugs on the Night of Power, Muhammad Hamshu, the front man and brother-in-law of Bashar al-Assad's brother Maher, apparently intervened, in vain, to negotiate the withdrawal of the assailants.⁷

Apart from al-Rifa'i and a handful of his colleagues, the Muslim scholars of Damascus and Aleppo remained relatively passive during the first year of the uprising. One of the factors explaining this attitude, which is especially relevant in the case of Aleppo, is the enduring sequels of repression of the early 1980s. In the country's second largest city, dozens of ulama were forced into exile at that time, thus further weakening a

religious elite that had already suffered from the Baath's centralist policies, since there was no institute or faculty for higher Islamic studies in Aleppo before 2006.

Whereas in the biggest cities the men of religion were divided, in the strongholds of the revolution a large majority of them sided with the protesters. In Deraa, both the imam of the Grand Mosque, Ahmad Sayasne, and the local Mufti, Rizq Abazayd, officially announced their defection. Sayasne visited President Bashar al-Assad in order to negotiate an end to the crisis, but the continuation of state violence eventually convinced him to call for the overthrow of the regime. Following the occupation of Deraa by the army in April 2011, both Sayasne and Abazayd were bullied into televised revocations. In Baniyas, on the coast, the very first demonstrations were led by Anas Ayrut, a young cleric who eventually fled the city and became a member of the opposition group, the Syrian National Council, in Istanbul. In Homs, which gradually surfaced as the capital of the revolution, clerics like Anas Suwayd participated in the creation of the local Revolutionary Council. Although supportive of the armed struggle, they have repeatedly opposed sectarian killings.⁸

After August 2011, mosques gradually lost their importance in the uprising for at least two reasons: first, as mentioned above, in Damascus and Aleppo, repression succeeded in making demonstrations increasingly rare in rebellious places of worship; second, in the regions where the opposition was most powerful (governorates of Homs, Hama, Idlib, and Reef Damascus), it became increasingly militarised and took control of several towns and neighbourhoods, thus reducing the importance of mosques as 'safe' zones for demonstrations. Only a reinvigoration of the protests in Damascus and Aleppo or in the regions being re-conquered by Assad's forces can change radically the situation.

1. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6Miv8DUvUI&feature=results_video&playnext=1&list=PLC3AD44DECC3F9267, July 1, 2011; www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZ0uF2zAcaA, July 16, 2011; www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBQeOh4hsrc, July 22, 2011; www.youtube.com/watch?v=OcQ4U4w5DFw, January 27, 2012.

2. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJiEBm8dvxM>.

3. For Bashar al-Assad's denial: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWbUmG-javw&feature=endscreen>; for the destruction of a minaret in Deir ez-Zour in August 2011 (view from the armoured vehicle firing on the mosque): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFXuHG89TJA>; in Homs, July 2011: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8n7A48II6Us&feature=related>

4. For background information on the Syrian *ulama*, see Thomas Pierret, *Baas et Islam en Syrie. La dynastie Assad face aux oulémas* (Paris: PUF, 2011).
5. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDaurYQpBjo, August 27, 2011. Pictures of al-Rifa'i on his hospital bed were circulated on the Internet.
6. Thomas Pierret, "Syrie: L'islam dans la revolution," *Politiqueétrangère* 76 (4) (2011), 888.
7. "Tabyidsura Muhammad Hamshu," (Whitewashing Muhammad Hamshu's image), *All4Syria*, August 27, 2011, <http://all4syria.info/web/archives/25008>
8. Friday sermon by Sheikh Mahmud al-Dalati, November 4, 2011 (mp3); phone interview with journalist Nir Rosen after his two months of research in Syria, January 2012.

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